Old computers and product stewardship – what to do, what to do?
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So your old computer has seen its useful life.

The screen flashes and fades, the hard disk is threatening to crash and it is too slow to keep up with contemporary software, much less do any kind of Internet work. You may have spent $2,000 on it originally and now the Goodwill doesn't even want it. What do you do with it?

Well, here are some ideas:
- Store it away as part of your kids' inheritance
- Save it for 50 years, then sell it for $25 as a curiosity in a collector's shop
- Use it as a planter, replacing the old boot or toilet
- Cut the circuit boards up and make earrings out of them

The attempt at humor aside, some folks are actually using these "solutions" – and some of them create big problems.

The circuit boards contain lead and other heavy metals. Cutting them up could present an exposure risk. The board also contains some precious metals. Melting them to recover the metal could expose you to dangerous gases. The cathode-ray tube contains large quantities of lead and phosphorous, too. Throwing them in the local landfill only passes the problem of managing the environmental threat on to the land and future generations. Bringing them to a household-hazardous-waste collection site **may** get them recycled or sent to a hazardous-waste disposal facility.

Interestingly, most of the computers that have been collected for recycling in the United States have been shipped out of country to places like China, where they are dismantled in ways that expose the workers, their families and the surrounding environment to all these dangers. Boards are exposed to heat to acquire metals, and CRTs are crushed with hammers to retrieve the copper inside. This is all documented in the film "Exporting Harm." (The video tape is available for check-out from the Hazardous Waste and Toxics Reduction Program.)

While some newer-technology computers are collected for resale or re-use through charitable organizations, this strategy only passes along the cost of end-of-life management (generally disposal) to lower-income folks who truly can't afford it. This can lead to roadside dumping.

Ecology trickles its computers to school districts that can't afford to buy new ones. Then, the school district becomes responsible for the disposal bill.

What should you really do with your computer? The real answer is practice "product stewardship." Product stewardship places responsibility for end-of-life product management in the hands of manufacturers. In their hands, with appropriate regulatory oversight, the manufacturers can assure that the computers will be handled in the most environmentally preferred manner available. The long-term hope is that electronic devices will be designed to be dismantled at the end of their useful life for re-use and recycling. Right now, that is not the case.

The National Electronics Product Stewardship Initiative (NEPSI) is a process started by the federal Environmental Protection Agency and facilitated by the University of Tennessee Center for Clean Products and Clean Technologies. Participants in the dialogue include state and local governments through the Product Stewardship Institute (PSI), non-governmental organizations, electronics recyclers and the electronics manufacturing industry. The Washington State Department of Ecology is a member of PSI and participates in the dialogue.

The intended outcome of the NEPSI process is to come to consensus on what the product stewardship of computers might look like, how the collection systems would be set up and who should pay for this service.

As you can imagine, the "who should pay" issue currently has the process a bit stymied. The funding approaches most being considered are an "advanced recovery fee" and manufacturer "partial-cost internalization."

The bottom line is that you will pay for it as a consumer. But will it be a visible or invisible part of the purchase price of your computer, or will it be a fee collected by government?

Computer manufacturers feel it would make the price of their product too high for consumers, even though the cost of consumer computers has dropped significantly in the past 10 years. It can be argued that, for free enterprise to truly be free, companies should bear the full cost of their products.

Government collecting fees and computers for recycling doesn't make sense. Government should not be in the middle of a private exchange between manufacturer and consumer.

And in the meantime, you are still left with your question, "what do I do with my old computer?"

Being optimistic that the NEPSI process will bear fruit, hold on to that computer until the system is established for you to have it recycled safely. It shouldn't be too long. Other alternatives include:
- Participate in the Hewlett-Packard or Dell recycling programs. When you buy a new one, you can send them your old one (at your cost). Dell has announced that it has contracted with a private recycler for the service (helping establish a new market sector). HP will send the equipment to its top-of-the-line recycling center in the U.S.
- Bring your old computer to a collection event, These are usually sponsored by a local government in cooperation with a big box retailer.